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April 26, 1997

MEMO

To: The United States Conference of Mayors Task Force on Public Schools
From: Richard Murnane and Frank Levy
Subject: Ideas on educational reform and school-to-career programs

The purpose of this memo is to list a few points that we believe are important in discussing school reform, educational standards, and school-to-career programs.

1. Schools are not worse today than 15 years ago. (Nationally test scores have been stable, even increased slightly.) The pressing need for better schools stems from changes in the economy. The education that was good enough preparation for the economy of the 1970s is not good enough preparation for the economy of the 1990s.
2. The strongest evidence of changes in the economy is the decline in the real earnings of high school graduates. In 1979, a 30-year-old male high school graduate earned the equivalent of \$28,000 expressed in today's dollars. Today, a 30-year-old male high school graduate earns about \$21,000.
3. The challenge is to provide all students with the New Basic Skills, the minimum skills needed to earn a middle-class living in today's economy.
4. A critical problem in meeting this challenge is that parents don't understand that it is their own child's school that needs to change. A 1996 Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup poll showed that while only 26% of parents gave the nation's schools a grade of A or B, 65% gave their own child's public school a grade of A or B. Parents' ratings correctly reflect that their children's schools are typically as good as the ones they attended 25 years ago. The problem is the mismatch between this quality and the demands of the economy today.

5. There is a pressing need for educational standards, and for assessments that measure student skills relative to the standards. It is critical that the assessments are tied to the standards and to curriculum frameworks which describe what teachers should teach. The aphorism, "what you test is what you get" is true. Good tests will provide motivation for instructional improvement. Poor tests will weaken instruction.

6. The promise of school-to-career programs is that hands-on pedagogy and work-based learning enable many students to master the New Basic Skills who otherwise would not. The goals of school-to-career programs are the same as the goals of other high school programs: prepare students for post-secondary education and for thriving in a competitive, changing economy. What is special about school-to-career programs is the pedagogy, not the goals. (The reason this distinction is important is that many parents, especially minority group parents, see school-to-career programs as the successor to vocational education programs that provided a second-class education and eliminated opportunities for their children to go on to college.)

7. The reason to use the term school-to-career instead of school-to-work is that the latter term implies that the students will not go to college. A critical goal of school-to-career programs is to increase college enrollments of participating students.

8. The challenges in developing good school-to-career programs can be seen as accomplishing three types of integration:

- I. integrating the work students do with academic teachers and vocational teachers
- ii. integrating the work students do in school and the work students do in workplaces
- iii. integrating the work students do in school and the work they do subsequently in community colleges.

All three types of integration are tough to bring about because of differences in cultures and norms.

9. Businesses can play important roles in developing effective school-to-career programs by contributing to solutions to three problems:

- i. incentives for high school students (except those competing for elite colleges) to do the hard work needed to master skills are weak.
- ii. many students from low-income families have no sense of what work is like in jobs today that pay middle-class wages or of the skills required to obtain these jobs.
- iii. most teachers have little sense of what work is like in good jobs outside the education sector or of the skills used in these jobs

The roles they can play include:

- i. using information on students' course-taking patterns and grades in making hiring decisions and publicize that they are doing this so as to improve incentives for students to take demanding courses and to do well in these courses.
- ii. provide opportunities for work-based learning and coordinate student work in firms with student work done in school.
- iii. provide teachers with opportunities to learn about work in high performance workplaces (for example, through summer jobs) so that they can develop an understanding of the skills their students will need and develop ideas for teaching these skills in a manner that connects skills to job opportunities.